

ORION

By
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Life 1

The story of the first time I died was rather unremarkable though necessary for telling the story. It was a gloomy, overcast day, and I was a Roman soldier. I waited on the front lines in anticipation of the vast horde of snarling barbarians in the distance. The air was damp and smelled of fresh rain. A horrid smell when combined with the bloodshed and bowel movements from the battle to come.

My fellow soldiers were not much older than me, and I could see the fear in their eyes. I tensed my face in the meanest expression I could. In hindsight, I probably looked just as afraid as the rest of them. Even though I had only seen seventeen winters, I was ready to prove myself in the art of war and win glory for the Roman Empire. It didn't matter that I could barely lift the sword or that my shoulders slouched from the weight of the armor. I was ready to die.

However, I wasn't planning on dying. Before the armies assembled on the field, I had been the head stable boy and mucked for the finest steeds in all of the land, and I was proud to scrape horse poo. I was a lower-class aqueduct worker's son who was now an essential part of the entourage of the great Orellicus! I also had taken myself way too seriously back then.

I'm glad that I got more than seventeen winters of life. I would have been an insufferable little snot otherwise. I shudder to think of what drivel that version of myself would say if he had access to my Twitter account. But that sense of duty and honor I felt back then was precisely how Orellicus suckered me into fighting on the front line in a battle where the Romans were almost guaranteed to lose.

It had all started in his tent on the eve of war.

The old coot beckoned me forward. Orellicus was a crusty fellow with white Roman curls. His robes were the finest in all of Rome, woven with gold and encrusted with jewels. Women who could have been his granddaughters surrounded him, and most of them were wearing next to nothing. They peeled his grapes, fanned him with a palm branch, and poured his wine.

I felt intimidated at the time because he had the presence of a god, and I was a lowly stable boy. He bellowed across the tent, "Orion, come forth."

Oh yeah, a quick note: My name was Orion. Or at least that's the name from my first life. I had other names after that. Almost too many to count, but Orion was the one I liked the best.

On with the story—

I walked up to the raised platform where Orellicus looked down on me with stern, hollow eyes. "Master?" I sputtered.

"Orion, the hour is late, and I imagine you're wondering why I have called you from the stables," Orellicus began.

I didn't know what to say. I'd never been in the tent before, much less heard more than two words directed at me from Orellicus.

My discomfort didn't seem to stop him. "Orion, my boy. We are living in grave times indeed. The barbarians are at the doorsteps of Rome, and tomorrow the might and glory of the Roman Empire will be tested."

"My liege, we will pass this test and defeat the barbarians. That is what Romans have always done. That is what we will always do," I said. Again, I took myself way too seriously back then.

Orellicus laughed. "Oh, my boy, if only it were that simple. Do you know how I got all this?" He gestured to the tent full of riches and women attending his every need.

"Strength in combat and victory in battle?" I said.

"That is part of it. The other part is wits, boy. You can defeat ten men in battle, but it only takes one to outwit you. Remember that. Your wits are how you'll survive."

He then bestowed upon me the rank of infantryman and gave some speech about the glory of the Roman Empire. It brought a tear to my eye in my first life, but I skipped it for this retelling, mainly because it makes me barf a little every time I hear it. How naïve I was to think that the greatest general in the world would see me, the poop cleaner, as a warrior. In reality, he was padding the front line, so his real warriors wouldn't die in the first wave.

I didn't know what cannon fodder was back then, but there I was, excited to become first-class fodder man the infantry meat shield.

A toothless man in shabby clothes took me away to get fitted for my armor and weapons. The armor was a joke. It was taken off the back of a dead infantryman. The keyword being *man*. I was a teenager who was a little small for my age bracket, and the armor made it feel like I was being crushed into the earth.

The toothless man saw my duress and said, “It gets easier the longer you wear it.”

It was a shame I only got to wear it for one day.

After I was fitted for my armor, he brought me over to the weapons tent and shoved a sword into my hand. It was too heavy to lift, and it clunked on the ground. I tried to ask for a smaller one, but he was already shuffling me out the door and directing me towards the soldiers’ tents.

I dragged my sword through the mud—I had to take several breaks to heave with exhaustion and throw up—until I finally made it to a group of soldiers sitting around a fire. They were singing jaunty war songs, drinking, and making merry. I attempted to insert myself around the fire, but they made sure to close any gaps in the seating arrangement.

Dejected and alone, I dragged my sword to a tree that was overlooking a nearby creek. I shed my armor, splashed my face with water, and drank. Afterward, I sat under the tree and looked at the moonlight poking through the branches.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I had a vision of myself. I was older and concentrating very hard. My hair was cut short but in a very odd hairstyle for my Roman sensibilities. I could only describe it as a wave of black water that had crashed on the side of my head and lapped gently on my ear as if the side of my face was a rocky out cropping. A woman snuck up behind me and kissed my cheek. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. Her eyes were deep blue and sparkled like cracked crystal, and her hair was golden like the rays of the sun. It was her face that lulled me into a deep sense of relaxation, and I was able to drift into a deep, content slumber.

Also, did I mention that it rained later that night? Fucking nature.

The next day, I faced my immediate horrible death from a horde of snarling, angry barbarians. I was in a line of servants, squires, and stable boys who’d been called to battle. Behind us were the real infantrymen. They were locked into a tortoise shell configuration while only about half of my unit had shields. In fact, some of my guys *only* had shields.

The army across the way were large men in hide furs with battle axes. They had painted themselves with blood and were screaming battle cries.

The two armies faced each other at the confluence of the rivers Tiber and Allia, about eleven miles north of Rome. It was a scenic area and quite serene when the ground wasn’t soaked with the blood of fallen soldiers.

When Orellicus shouted the orders to attack, I raced towards the horde. However, my armor and sword slowed me down, the blade dragging along behind me in the dirt. So what was a race for most was sort of a fast shuffle for me. My unit clashed with the barbarians a full thirty seconds before I made it to the battle.

For a brief moment, I was in this weird spot where I got to watch the barbarians hack to shreds all the people who had been standing next to me seconds before. And behind me was this tight tortoise shell of shields and spears marching towards the broken line of barbarians.

For maybe a second or two, I thought I could survive. Maybe my fellow Roman soldiers would open a hole large enough for me to fit through, and I could hold a spear instead. My dreams were shattered when I saw an angry man with wild eyes break from the battle ahead and rush toward me.

He gripped a double-bladed ax the size of a horse's ass above his head with one hand. The man was undoubtedly the inspiration for the Titans from the Greek myths. His eyes bugged out as he charged, and I lifted my sword with all my might.

Then, just as he was on top of me, by some miracle, I was able to raise my sword high enough to block the weapon swinging at my head. The sword deflected the blow to my right shoulder blade, where the ax cut through most of the muscle and bone.

I collapsed to the ground in fear and pain and futilely tried to reattach my arm. It was a weird thing to do when dying, like if I could just pop it back into place, all would be better, and I could go back to mucking.

The barbarian didn't even slow down after he wounded me. He went right by and was presumably killed by the tortoiseshell infantry which passed overhead moments later. I remember being taken aback by their lack of regard for their fallen comrade. They *trampled* me, stepping on my face, chest, and even the arm stump.

I spent the rest of the battle bleeding out from the wound. Eventually, the pain receded as my body went numb. During that time, I gazed at the clouds overhead. They were the gorgeous wispy white puffs that made the sky look like a grand tapestry. It was a beautiful day.

Strangely, I wasn't sad or angry that I was dying. I felt proud to have given my life for the Roman Empire. I wept not with tears of regret, but with joy. I was such a sap back then.

For most people, that would be it. Fade out. Roll credits. This was your life. For me, it was just the beginning of figuring out who, or what, I really was. And while I didn't think about my first life too much, there was one point that I should have understood sooner.

Most people think that when a soldier dies on a battlefield, honored to have sacrificed themselves for their country, that's it. They drift off into the netherworld. But the reality is that dying is a long, drawn-out, and painful process. When I finally came to terms with my death, it wasn't over. I bled, then bled, and then bled some more.

I must have been close to drowning in a pool of blood when I finally saw another human. At that point, I was delirious and drifting in and out of consciousness. I could no longer tell you that I was part of the Roman Empire or that I was proud to be dying for it. I was moments away from my final breath, which was labored and intense even though I was too numb to feel it.

That's when another teenager about my age, with a mop of dirty brown hair and a wry smile, stood over my corpse. I didn't know his name at the time, so for the purpose of this narrative, I'm going to call him Stabby, for what he did next. He pulled a long, thin dagger from his belt and looked me in the eye and said, "Sorry, bro."

He poked the dagger right through my eye socket and into my skull. Then I was dead.

The weird part was not that someone had come to kill me. That's a very typical post-battle job, arguably worse than cannon fodder. Stabby had to poke into the skull of all the people who were writhing in pain waiting to die at the end of the battle. Medical attention sucked back then (literally, leeches were the number one treatment for just about anything), so it was better to just kill all the wounded, at least the ones who were too injured to stand on their own.

The weird part was that Stabby said, "Sorry, bro." I didn't know it at the time, but "bro" wasn't exactly in the Roman dictionary. Strange final words to hear for a person who gave his life for the glory of the Roman Empire.

Life 2

After a person dies, there's nothing, at least for me. It's a big dark void where I don't exist. Let me rephrase that. I *could* exist. There might be a heaven or hell, or a Cerberus on the other side of the river Styx. But I never remember what happens after my deaths. Now, I don't know if I'll even come back, so it sucks not knowing what's next, if there even is a *next*. Before today, if I close my eyes in a previous life, I'll open them in a new one, with one minor caveat: all my memories are in place.

My father in my second life beat out of me any predilection to ponder why I had Roman stable boy memories overlapping peasant boy somewhere in medieval England memories. So I didn't spend much of my second life wondering why I had two set of memories and thought it was a story to take me away from my monstrous father.

He didn't just beat me when my mind wandered. He smacked me around when blight destroyed our crops, and when the mule died on the way to the market. He did it when he was drunk and when he was sober. He beat me when I didn't keep the stew hot enough or failed to haul two buckets from the stream.

The whole abusive father thing was a real pity too because my second life's childhood home was even more beautiful than the field where the Tiber and Allia rivers met. I lived in a thatched-roof house at the edge of a thick forest with trees old enough for Merlin to be napping in the trunks. There was a crystal clear lake with fresh, cold water and an old oak tree that was a great place to hide from my father, so long as I wasn't gone for too long.

The countryside was majestic and stretched from horizon to horizon with raw unkempt nature. There was a cross off to the side of the house to mark where my mother and sister were buried. They didn't even make it through childbirth. Sometimes I wonder if that's why he hit me. He was stuck with a useless boy who dreamt of faraway places, while his life partner rotted below the earth.

One crisp morning during my teenage years while I was gathering berries for the winter preserves, I saw the most exciting thing I had ever seen in two whole lives. Coming down the road was a grand procession of men on horseback. They were wearing shiny metal armor and flew banners of the king. Right in the center was an elaborate carriage and inside was a beautiful maiden with long curly golden curls framing her perfect face.

I climbed a tree to get a better look at her, and right as the procession passed, the bough broke, and like the song, I tumbled to the ground and rolled in front of the carriage, startling a horse. I quickly righted myself and used some of my first life knowledge to calm the beast. Before I could show off my stable boy skills, though, the captain of the guard yanked me away from the steed and yelled, “We have a highwayman, milady! Shall I dispose of him for attempting to rob your ladyship?”

“I didn’t rob anybody,” I croaked. I was still afraid of death during those days.

“Shut up, boy.” The captain raised his hand to smack me, but the woman in the carriage called out.

“Wait,” she demanded, and the captain lowered his hand.

A woman who was not only beautiful but could stop beatings? I was in love!

“Bring the child here,” the woman said.

“M-Milady,” I said. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

The captain shoved me towards the carriage and held his hand on his sword. It was the old “try anything, and I’ll decapitate you,” threat. At the time, I was turned into a drooling pile of horse poo because I was about to encounter a real woman. Even though I already had one more life than most people got, I had never touched a woman, or even got to be so close to one.

In my first life, I died before I did anything but muck because women weren’t exactly lining up to date the stable boy. In this life, I was worse off. As a teenage boy living with his dad in the woods, the only women who lived close were in the village, and my dad never let me leave the cart when we went to the town, so I had to lust after them from afar.

The villagers, however, wasn’t exactly known for its beauty. The number of missing teeth and warts were metrics used to compare attractiveness. The best-looking man in town had only three warts, and only one was visible on his face. The hottest woman was missing three teeth, and only half of the remaining chompers were stained with rot.

I laid awake many nights in the tiny crawl space in the attic among the spiders. I reminisced about the glances I stole when I caught a patch of bare skin underneath the hood of a villager. It was enough to get by because I didn’t know anything else.

Now, a real-life noblewoman, who was an angel descended from the heavens, wanted to see me, and when I got closer, I realized she looked my age. I was stunned. Thankfully, she spoke first before I liquefied into a pile of man goo.

“Tell me, boy,” she said. “What were you doing in that tree?”

“I did—cow—birds and stuff—” was the extent of my vocabulary.

“You aren’t perhaps trying to steal a glance at the prize for the tournament tomorrow?”

“Tournament? What tournament?”

The captain slapped me and said, “Are you so naïve, boy that you do not know about the king’s plans?”

“I don’t leave the farm much,” I managed to say.

He smacked me again and said, “It is the duty of all the king’s subjects to know of the king’s plans.”

“Enough, Grimwalt,” the princess said. “My father will award a kiss from my lips to the bravest subject in the land. Do you plan to enter the tournament tomorrow?”

Her guards all roared with laughter, and the captain said, “The whelp would kiss a headstone before he got near your lips, milady!”

The princess chided him, “Come now, Grimwalt. Isn’t the founding principle of our king that all people are equal under God? So shouldn’t this young man enter the tournament so that he will have an equal chance at winning my affection as any other?”

“This boy has no better chance at winning than finding a dragon that shits golden eggs!” Grimwalt said, determined to keep me in my place.

At the time, I was more than happy to oblige. “I’m sorry, milady. I did not mean to disturb your journey. I’ve held you up for too long.”

Afraid of looking her in the eye and the captain who would like nothing more than to run me through, I backed up into another soldier.

“Nonsense,” the princess said. “You’ve added more interesting conversation in these few moments than Grimwalt could provide in a fortnight. I trust I will see you at the tournament tomorrow?”

I stammered, unable to comprehend what was happening. Grimwalt smacked me and yelled, “Answer her, boy!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” the princess said. “Let it be known that under the eyes of the king, everyone is equal. Be them coated in the dust of a farm or slathered in riches; everyone is to be treated with

the same dignity. Best you remember that Grimwalt, for this boy may very well be your king one day.”

“Yes, milady,” Grimwalt said and then gave me the stink eye.

The princess ordered the entourage forward, and they all marched on. A cloud of dust enveloped me, and I choked. Grimwalt mounted his horse and lingered until the caravan rounded the corner. I about recovered from the assault of dust when Grimwalt held his sword to my neck.

“You sullied the good princess’s name,” he spat. “I will kill you before I let you sully the throne as well. But since the princess requests your presence tomorrow, I must let you live for now. The princess has taken a liking to you, though I can’t imagine why, which means you will attend tomorrow. You will fight, or I will burn your farm to the ground, murder your goats, and you will die a coward.”

Grimwalt spurred his horse into a gallop and kicked up more dust. Between coughs, I managed to sputter, “The princess likes me?”

To finish reading the story go [here](#).